Barak's Last Battle

An Israeli Lion in Winter

Jonathan Tepperman

Ehud Barak is one of Israel's most important leaders—and also one of its most enigmatic and controversial. As defense minister in the current government, Barak prosecuted the November Gaza campaign, handles the Palestinian brief, and, along with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, gets the last word on whether to attack Iran—Israel's most pressing security concern despite the recent focus on Hamas. Given the pariah status of Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, Barak, a frequent presence in Washington, essentially covers that portfolio as well. Yet despite 35 years of military service and more than a decade in public life, Barak remains something of a cipher—a man one of Israel's leading columnists, Ari Shavit, compares to a stealth bomber ("the usual radar doesn't capture him"). "I don't know anyone more difficult to read," Shavit says.

It's no wonder: to say that Barak is full of contradictions doesn't begin to do him justice. Now 70, Barak first came to national prominence in his 30s, as a hero among heroes in a security-obsessed country. An erudite, accomplished classical pianist, Barak was a special forces legend famous for actions such as planning the hostage-rescue raid on Entebbe and sneaking into Lebanon on an assassination run dressed as a woman. He finished his military career as chief of the general staff, then parachuted into politics in 1995, drafted into the left-wing Labor Party by his mentor, then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In 1999, a few years after Rabin's murder, Barak was elected prime minister himself in a landslide, promising to withdraw from Lebanon and make peace with both the Syrians and the Palestinians. Less than two years later, his peace plans were in ashes, the second intifada was raging, and Barak was out of a job after the shortest tenure of any Israeli leader in history.

JONATHAN TEPPERMAN is Managing Editor of *Foreign Affairs*. Follow him on Twitter @j_tepperman.

Banished from power, he withdrew to a lucrative private life. And then he reinvented himself again. Coming back from exile, he retook the reins of Labor and reentered the government in 2007 as defense minister. When his longtime sparring partner Netanyahu was reelected in 2009, Barak became his closest confidant and most powerful adviser.

Rather than win plaudits or even grudging respect for his return to relevance and his role as "Mr. Security," however, Barak saw his popularity fall through the floor. In a country famously unable to agree on anything, there is consensus on one issue: almost no one seems to like Barak. A 2010 survey by the independent pollster Dahlia Scheindlin ranked him the least popular major politician in Israel, with a favorability rating of only 22 percent. Although his popularity inched up during the Gaza campaign, most polls taken throughout the fall suggested that he might not even muster enough votes in the January 22 elections to keep his seat in the next Knesset. In one November survey, 60 percent of Israelis polled said they approved of his work as defense minister, but only three percent said they would vote for him. And so in late November, in a move that stunned everyone, Barak announced that he would not compete in the elections and would withdraw from political life—although he conspicuously avoided ruling out continuing to serve in some capacity if asked.

How was this former idol driven out of politics, and why is he so reviled in his homeland? How did an erstwhile champion of the left become the partner of a right-wing prime minister, so close that they are often referred to as a kitchen cabinet of two, the Batman and Robin of Israeli politics? How did this storied warrior become first a devoted peacemaker and then, later, an arch-hawk on Iran? What does Barak actually believe, and what will become of him after January? For if there's one indisputable fact about this most polarizing of figures, it's that he is hard to get rid of—and every retreat lays the groundwork for an eventual counterattack.

A COMPLICATED MAN

The best way to answer the questions surrounding Barak is to start with his history, especially the tumultuous last 13 years. When we met this past fall to discuss them, the defense minister seemed supremely relaxed. The bloodshed in Gaza had yet to begin, but it was already a hectic moment in Israel's always frenetic political life: the Knesset was

voting that day to dissolve itself ahead of the upcoming elections, and the halls were thronged with TV cameras, frantic aides, and stony-faced bodyguards. Yet inside Barak's cramped, drab parliamentary office, all was calm. Dressed in a black suit and white shirt with no tie (the dress uniform of an Israeli politician), Barak, feet on a coffee table, looked older and more tired than he does in photographs but still projected gruff confidence. Surveying his record, Barak told me he felt "neither guilt nor self-pity." He paused, then continued, "I feel kind of . . . content about every choice that I've made in the past. I don't feel the need to complain or explain too much."

Such sangfroid, real or affected, is remarkable given the number of daring and dangerous gambits Barak has attempted in his career—and even more so given how many of them have failed disastrously. The most prominent failure, of course, and the one likely to forever define Barak's legacy, was his attempt as prime minister to cut the Gordian knots binding Israel to permanent insecurity by ending the conflicts with Syria and the Palestinians and the two-decade-long occupation of Lebanon. It's hard to overstate the audacity of this triple bank shot. Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. State Department adviser who worked with Barak on the peace process, described it, with only a little hyperbole, as "a wacko agenda that bordered on the megalomaniacal."

The history of how it went wrong, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, with the Syrians and at Camp David with Yasir Arafat, has been written and rewritten countless times from all perspectives. There is no clear consensus on who bears the lion's share of the blame for the talks' collapse, but most analysts put at least some on Barak—for his waffling (with the Syrians) and his haste and highhandedness (with Arafat). If the causes are disputable, however, the consequences are not. Instead of peace coming to the Middle East, the Syrian track stalled and the Palestinians hit Israel with a bloody uprising. Israeli troops did pull out of Lebanon, but the withdrawal was chaotic and accompanied by Hezbollah rocket fire.

As the flames mounted, Barak's electoral coalition, much of which he had alienated through careless and dictatorial management, began to crumble. Ariel Sharon, another former war hero who then led the Likud Party, offered to form a national unity government. Barak refused, deciding to take his chances in early elections—and was trounced.

Barak retreated to the business world of Tel Aviv to lick his wounds and make money—lots of it, by all accounts. He bought a flashy

Hawk and dove: Ehud Barak at a press conference, November 2011

REUTERS / BLAIR GABLE

apartment for millions of dollars. He divorced his wife (and the mother of his children) and married a childhood sweetheart. Earning big and living large is not uncommon for ex-politicians in the West, but it is still deemed unseemly in Israel, which clings to the myth of its Spartan pioneer roots, and Barak was excoriated for it in the press.

But then came Israel's botched war with Lebanon in 2006, a fiasco that offered the exile an opportunity to muscle his way back into politics. Retaking control of Labor from the feckless Amir Peretz—a former trade unionist who, as defense minister, had mishandled the conflict—Barak cast himself as a more humble, experienced politician who had learned from his mistakes, telling his party he understood that "there are no shortcuts and leadership is not a one-man show." The party bought it, and he replaced Peretz in Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima-led coalition government.

Then, in 2008, Olmert was forced to resign because of corruption allegations, and new elections brought Netanyahu and the Likud back to power. This development proved awkward for Barak, who had promised during the campaign not to join a Netanyahu government. But in one of the most striking turns in his switchback career, he pirouetted once

again, dragging a reluctant Labor into the Likud coalition. When, a few months later, Labor rebelled and prepared to bolt from the government, Barak jumped first, leading four other legislators out of Labor and into a new party, Atzmaut (Independence). The gambit worked in that it allowed the renegades to stay in the government. But it gutted Labor, reducing the parliamentary bloc of Israel's once-dominant party to a meager eight seats (out of 120), and the process cost Barak much of his remaining public support.

Barak then proceeded to forge a remarkably close working relationship with the new prime minister. Understanding how these former adversaries, the longtime standard-bearers of Israel's left and right, could evolve such an intimate alliance requires understanding two distinctive aspects of Israeli political life. The first is that the country's fractious parliamentary system, with its numerous small parties, makes coalitions among unlikely partners surprisingly common. The second is the dominance of Israel's military culture. Virtually all Israelis spend time in the army, a life-defining experience that generates profound social cohesion. Barak and Netanyahu, moreover, aren't just ordinary veterans. They served together in Sayeret Matkal, Israel's most elite commando force, an outfit so legendary that it's known in Hebrew simply as "the Unit."

Barak's eyes light up with real affection when he speaks about his former lieutenant; he describes Netanyahu as "capable of deep thought and possessing a deep sense of history."

Barak's eyes light up with real affection when he speaks about his former lieutenant; he describes Netanyahu (known in Israel almost exclusively as "Bibi") as "capable of deep thought and possessing a deep sense of history," explaining their relationship this way:

> Israel is not a nation of 300 million. The whole elite is probably just several thousand people, and they all know each other. So Israeli politics is familial. I first met Bibi when he was only 20 years old. I was eight years older. I was the commander of his unit, and both of his brothers were also in it. That's a formative experience. The unit was very small, and we were stretched to the utmost. And I became a kind of operational mentor to Bibi. I guided him, directed him in his first missions. There has always been a mutual respect, a kind of appreciation, a basic trust.

Indeed, most analysts who know the two men say that despite their differences and past political battles, they retain a deep and genuine bond. Barak and Netanyahu "have a high regard for themselves and each other," explained David Makovsky, a former diplomatic correspondent for *Haaretz*. "They both see themselves as big-picture guys. They come out of the special forces culture and are far more similar than they are different."

Of course, the pair's odd-couple routine has also served both of them extremely well. Barak has given Netanyahu centrist cover, making the prime minister's otherwise hard-right coalition look more mainstream and giving it greater legitimacy on military issues. Netanyahu, for his part, has given his old commander power and relevance that Barak, with his lack of popular support, couldn't access otherwise. The resulting deal, as Miller described it, "is like what they say about old age: not great unless you consider the alternative." Both sides come out ahead: "Bibi is likely to be the longest-serving prime minister in Israeli history, and Barak gets to be in the middle of the decision-making process at one of the most critical stages in Israel's life." Netanyahu's strategic timidity and general risk aversion—his boldness is more apparent in words than deeds—only sweetens the bargain. Martin Indyk, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, told me that "Bibi's caution makes it possible for Barak to do his own thing"—an irresistible prospect for someone used to giving orders.

THE STRATEGIST

All this history and background helps explain two important things about Barak: his basic psychology and how he came to his current positions on the critical issues in his portfolio, Iran and the Palestinians.

Ask any American or Israeli analyst with firsthand experience how to make sense of Barak's serpentine career, his successes and failures, and his unpopularity, and you'll hear the same thing again and again: that Barak is the ultimate strategic thinker. An inveterate risk taker—one former army commander of Barak's told me that as a soldier, the young commando devised schemes that often had him facing *tzalash* or *tarash* (commendation or demotion)—Barak still sees the world as a battlefield or a chessboard. This means that he always thinks several steps ahead. But it also means that he must make countless predictions about how other players will respond, and he then assumes that by force of will, he can ensure that they act accordingly. Indyk put it this

way: "There's a legend about Barak that as a hobby he takes apart clocks and puts them together again. His plans are like that: always incredibly intricate and carefully thought through and drilled and drilled. But when they're applied, they often end up being too clever by half because humans aren't clocks." Added Makovsky: "When you think ahead by six steps, there are at least six, if not 12, 24, or 48 assumptions you have to make. When it works, it's brilliant. When it fails, it collapses horribly"—as did Barak's grand peace overtures, his decision as prime minister to spurn Sharon's offer and seek early elections, and his move to split Labor.

Barak's history also reveals a profound lack of concern for ideological consistency, a supreme faith in pragmatic realpolitik. Critics such as Miller see this as a lack of scruples: "I think that, much like Bibi, you're dealing with a guy whose principles are capable of being reshaped in response to political exigencies." But Barak and his defenders explain his behavior in another way: as a willingness to do whatever's necessary to safeguard Israel's security, even at the risk of appearing inconsistent. As he told me the day after our first meeting, when we reconvened in his much more impressive office atop the towering Ministry of Defense building in the Kirya, in central Tel Aviv, "I am a man of action—I never hesitate to take action." "I follow, and am very committed to, the tradition of Yitzhak Rabin and David Ben-Gurion [Israel's founding father]," he said, pointing to their portraits on his office wall, "because their approach was to always be open-eyed and wholly realistic about the need to do what's necessary."

Ask any American or Israeli analyst with firsthand experience how to make sense of Barak, and you'll hear the same thing again and again: that Barak is the ultimate strategic thinker.

This philosophy, along with Barak's bruising history as a policymaker, has done much to shape his thinking on current events. His current hawkishness on Iran, his readiness to strike Gaza, and even his latest position on the Palestinian peace process—he still favors a two-state solution, but one achieved by Israel's unilaterally withdrawing from the West Bank—can seem, when contrasted with his early record as a peacemaker, like the reaction of a dove mugged by reality. But the hawk-dove divide is hard to parse in Israel, which has

a long history of pragmatic warriors who chose to extend an olive branch when the time seemed right—think Rabin, another ex-general, who later received the Nobel Peace Prize for his shepherding of the Oslo accords, or even Shimon Peres, who started out as the father of Israel's nuclear program but later, as foreign minister, pursued peace talks with Arafat. These same leaders also proved willing to pick up the sword again when circumstances warranted. Barak self-consciously aligns himself with this tradition, so it should be no surprise that his positions can seem to contradict one another over time.

Consider how his stance on Iran's nuclear program—which remains Israel's main strategic preoccupation—has shifted during his current tenure. After becoming, with Netanyahu, the most forceful advocate of an attack on Iran, hinting darkly all through the spring and summer of 2012 that Israel would act soon if the United States didn't, Barak suddenly seemed to relax the timeline for a strike during the fall. He told me the explanation for the change was simple: the Iranians had suddenly diverted a third of their enriched uranium fuel rods to medical research. When I pressed him on why Tehran would have done this, he conceded that it was probably because Israeli threats and U.S.-led sanctions had worked—in other words, that Iran had acted rationally and been deterred. Yet he continued to insist that deterrence wouldn't work if Iran went nuclear and that Israel had to do everything in its power to prevent such a catastrophe.

That may sound inconsistent, but Barak's basic approach to security, although he never articulated it as such, boils down to expecting the worst and acting accordingly. It's a logical position for a chastened former peacemaker. It explains why he argues in the alternative when making his case against Iran, insisting that even if the mullahs probably don't intend to attack Israel directly—"I don't believe that they're developing a nuclear capacity because of Israel per se," he told me—they just might do so anyway. (Here he pointed me to a 2001 speech by former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani calling Israel a "one-bomb country" and to the work of Bernard Lewis, the Princeton scholar who has compared Iran's regime to a doomsday cult willing to embrace the apocalypse.) Even if Iran never attacks, Barak continued, Iran's getting the bomb would still enable its hegemonic pretensions in the neighborhood, empower its proxies, set off a regional arms race, undermine Israel's strategic monopoly in the Middle East, and raise the risk that nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists.

Barak's pessimism also extends to the United States. It explains why he and Netanyahu were willing to push President Barack Obama to go much further in making a commitment to prevention than the White House wanted—a move Barak called "a major achievement." This campaign has led to accusations that Barak acted in bad faith, making threats he never intended to carry out merely to box Washington into a corner, forcing it to take a stronger position. Nahum Barnea, another of the country's most influential columnists, described Barak's efforts last spring and summer to me as a "$3 billion lobbying operation," in which Israel spent nearly its entire annual defense aid allotment from the United States on measures meant not to convince Iran of the imminence of an attack but rather to convince the United States—so that Washington would take the threat seriously and harden its own policy in order to head off a possible conflict.

Israel, Barak said, is heading into "a historic tragedy" in the West Bank.

Barak denies such a cynical interpretation of his actions. But even if he was trying to game Washington, his pessimism ensures that he'll never be completely assuaged by U.S. security guarantees. His skepticism stems, in part, from a clear-eyed assessment of the two countries' differing priorities. "When America looks at the Iran situation, they look at it from the other side of the globe," he said. "They may worry about Iranian nuclear proliferation, but it appears, at most, as another blip on a big screen with other blips on it. For us, today, Iran is the only major blip; it fills the screen."

Barak's position also owes to his reading of history. "Over the last three decades, there were six cases of nonsuperpowers who tried to turn nuclear," he told me, gesturing at a big world map on the wall of his Kirya office. "North Korea and Pakistan succeeded. Libya and South Africa were derailed. And Iraq and Syria were physically blocked. The very fact that six tried and two succeeded tells you that anything can happen. I really trust and believe that Obama means what he says [when he talks about preventing Iran from getting a bomb], but there is a limit to what he can commit himself to doing in the future." Later, he added, "When Pakistan was trying to get the bomb, the Americans bribed them with F-16s not to. Now, some of those same F-16s are wired to carry Pakistani A-bombs. And remember Clinton and North Korea. He was determined to stop them. But look what happened."

Such a jaundiced view of history also lies behind Barak's advocacy of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from most of the West Bank. Barak's motivation here has little or nothing to do with Palestinian well-being. His argument is twofold: one, that ending the occupation would strengthen Israel's moral and political standing against Iran, and two, that it would defuse the demographic time bomb facing the Jewish state. Israel, he said, is heading into "a historic tragedy" in the West Bank: "The painful reality is that between the Jordan River and the sea, we have 12 million people: 7.5 [million] Israelis and 4.5 million Palestinians. If over this ground, there is only one sovereign, called Israel, it will inevitably become either non-Jewish or nondemocratic, since there's no question that in the long run, it will have an Arab majority. So I believe we have to do something. I don't believe in waiting."

UNFORGIVEN

One might expect such positions to endear Barak to at least some of the Israeli public. After all, fear of an Iranian bomb and the determination to keep Tehran from getting one are almost universal in Israel, even on the left; that's why war remains a distinct possibility under the next government, just as it has been for the current one. Meanwhile, a clear majority of Israelis favor a two-state solution, even though they are also disgusted by the terror tactics and lack of leadership on the Palestinian side. Yet although his forceful response to missile fire from Gaza won Barak respect, instead of giving him credit for trying to solve the underlying Palestinian problem (unlike Netanyahu, who seems determined to ignore it), most Israelis accuse him of manipulating the issue for personal positioning. And they suspect something similar about his stance on Iran, an issue on which Barak stood shoulder to shoulder with the prime minister until the current campaign season.

Such charges are probably unfair. While no experienced politician ever disregards political calculations, let alone during an election cycle, Barak deserves more credit than he typically gets for advocating bold policies not always popular or in line with his own government. Indeed, he's been doing so for years, if inconsistently. He first raised unilateralism on the peace process, for example, shortly after the collapse of the Camp David talks more than a decade ago.

The fact that he's nonetheless treated with suspicion underlines what is probably the greatest of all the mysteries surrounding Barak:

why, exactly, the country he has fought so hard to protect holds him in such low esteem. The numbers are striking. Barak told me that he thought he would need about 120,000 votes to make it into the next Knesset. That's a tiny number, even for Israel—about as much support as one would need to become mayor of Milwaukee or Albuquerque. Yet his decision to drop out of the race suggested that he did not expect to clear even that low bar.

There's something tragic about that. For all his faults, Barak has repeatedly put his life and career on the line for his country, which he has served for 50 years. In the words of Aluf Benn, editor in chief of *Haaretz*, Barak "has one of the best analytic minds in the world, let alone Israel." Even Barak's detractors admit the man is brilliant. Indeed, Benn adds, Barak is responsible for "most of the original ideas in Israeli security and foreign policy thinking in the last 20 years." In a land of dirty politicians, furthermore, Barak is more or less clean. Yet leaders such as Lieberman and Olmert, both of whom have been convicted of criminal charges, are more popular and are seen as viable candidates while Barak, whom one commentator recently called "the man everyone loves to hate," is not. Even his most frequently cited failures were not unmitigated disasters, Shavit points out: "At the end of the day, the unilateral retreat from Lebanon was messy, but it saved us. It saved us because it ended our occupation of southern Lebanon and gave legitimacy to our struggle against Hezbollah. The peace initiative in 2000, although it did not lead to peace, also saved us by giving us the internal and external legitimacy needed to fend off the Palestinian terror offensive of 2000 to 2004." That Barak gets no credit "points to something flawed and distorted in [Israel's] public life," Shavit said.

The worst crime Barak committed in the eyes of the public is the way he exposed as a fantasy the idea that a negotiated peace with the Palestinians was possible.

As such comments suggest, none of the conventional explanations for Barak's low standing suffice, although peers and the public have plenty of cause for frustration. The case against Barak usually starts with his abandonment of Labor—even though other Israeli leaders (such as Sharon and Olmert) have ditched their parties and not suffered for it. It then moves on to his strategic blunders—although here, too,

he is hardly alone. His personal shortcomings are often cited: Barak is not a strong public speaker or even particularly smooth talking in person (he has, for example, a disconcerting habit of grabbing his gut to emphasize a point). Although charming when he wants to be, he doesn't suffer fools: when we first met, he wouldn't really engage until he'd grilled me on my professional and intellectual credentials. As he himself put it, "I'm not a great pretender. I can't pretend. I don't want to pretend." Nor does he think much about his image: on the day of our first interview, he was eating a Popsicle and didn't bother to get up when I walked into the room; for our next session, at the Defense Ministry, he wore a black Hawaiian shirt.

But such bluntness is no great sin and might even be considered endearing in another politician. More troubling is his lack of social or emotional intelligence. He's often called aloof and arrogant—not for nothing do his friends call him Napoleon—and he is infamous for acting like he's the smartest guy in the room, as though "surrounded by mental pygmies," according to Makovsky. During our conversations, Barak managed to drop references to Nietzsche, de Gaulle, Spinoza, Baudrillard, Maimonides, Milton Friedman, Jeffrey Sachs, and Copernicus. Barak suffers from having "always been told that he was the brightest guy in the class, the platoon, the military command," said one former high Israeli official who has advised several prime ministers. "He thinks so highly of himself that he cannot have a real conversation with anybody." Another official is reported to have said, "Barak can tell you everything you've ever said in your life, but he makes clear that he hasn't listened to a word of it."

Such shortcomings have cost him with colleagues, aides, and the public. "He's not a man who bears a grudge," said a former U.S. official who often dealt with Barak. "So he doesn't expect others to bear a grudge toward him, which is part of why he's so inadequate as a politician. He's all brain and no heart." Yet even these traits, like the ostentatious apartment that got him savaged in the press, shouldn't be enough to nullify his substantial public record, especially with a population not known for its social skills and full of brusque and blemished politicians.

The real explanation for Barak's struggle with the public thus probably lies elsewhere—in the way that he has managed, throughout his career, to inadvertently strike the raw nerves in Israel's collective psyche, exposing its own deepest conflicts and pathologies. Many of

Barak's boldest and most controversial actions, after all, have held up an unflattering mirror to the Israeli public, and that public, not liking what it has seen, has responded by looking away and blaming him for it.

The younger Barak represented the old Israeli ideal: a selfless warrior-intellectual, born and bred on a collectivist kibbutz, who rose to the pinnacle of power. But then he failed spectacularly, embraced consumer capitalism and started earning and spending wildly, and eventually abandoned the left entirely. His path resembles the country's own a little too closely for comfort. Rejecting him seems to help many Israelis assuage their uneasiness about following a similar trajectory.

But the worst crime Barak committed in the eyes of the public, and the one many Israelis will never forgive him for, is the way, in 2000, he exposed as a fantasy the idea that a negotiated peace with the Palestinians was possible. Barak himself blames Arafat for the collapse of the Camp David talks and says that all he did was "unmask" the Palestinian leader. But for at least half the population, Barak's great sin was, as Barnea put it, "blowing up the myth and showing Israelis the tragic truth." Shavit agreed: "Barak has many faults, and he failed personally in many ways. But when you see that Lieberman is forgiven where Barak is not, you come to the conclusion that the Israeli left cannot forgive him for trying peace and proving that the old naive peace theory was wrong. This is a national trauma, and many demonize him for it."

STAYING ALIVE

Whatever his critics might think, Barak has no intention of simply fading away. His abrupt announcement in November of his coming exit from politics may signal the end of his career—but don't count on it. There are plenty of stories of Israeli politicians who managed to return from the political grave merely by sticking around. Miller points out that "in Israeli politics, you can be dead, or you can be dead and buried." Barak is merely the former, and he clearly draws hope from the cases of Peres, who as president at 89 has finally found the kind of public approval that long eluded him, and Rabin, who spent more than a decade in the wilderness before regaining power.

Barak could conceivably pull off a similar resurrection. The Israeli right, now represented by a new megaparty including Netanyahu's

Likud and Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, doesn't look likely to expand beyond its base in the elections. The center will be up for grabs if the Kadima Party—currently the largest party in the Knesset—gets wiped out, as expected. And no candidates on the left have serious national security credentials or true leadership experience. "Only Barak has the personal gravitas and foreign policy background to match Bibi," says Benn, and Barak knows it.

Ironically, perhaps, his hopes now rest on the loyalty of his old lieutenant, Netanyahu, who is likely to win the election and could then name Barak, although not in the Knesset, defense minister through a procedure known as a personal appointment. Many Israelis suspect that is precisely what Barak is counting on. Walking away from politics as he did, riding high on his performance in the Gaza operation, has allowed him to turn certain defeat into one last shot at relevance. The resignation, ironically, "maximizes his chance of being called back into service," says Shlomo Avineri, a veteran Israeli analyst. Amir Mizroch, an Israeli journalist and blogger, calls it "a truly Sayeret Matkal–like operation—uncanny, unpredictable, with little or no chance of success, but if pulled off, extremely brilliant." Mizroch explains: "By exiting gracefully at the helm of a party that had zero chance of crossing the electoral threshold, Barak positions himself as . . . the elder statesman-general that any prime minister"—especially one with few other good options and desperate not to lose his best conduit to Washington—"would be wise to keep at his side."

The daredevil strategist, it seems, is at it again. His final gambit could still fail, as so many have before. But even if it does, Ehud Barak is unlikely to vanish from Israeli life for long.